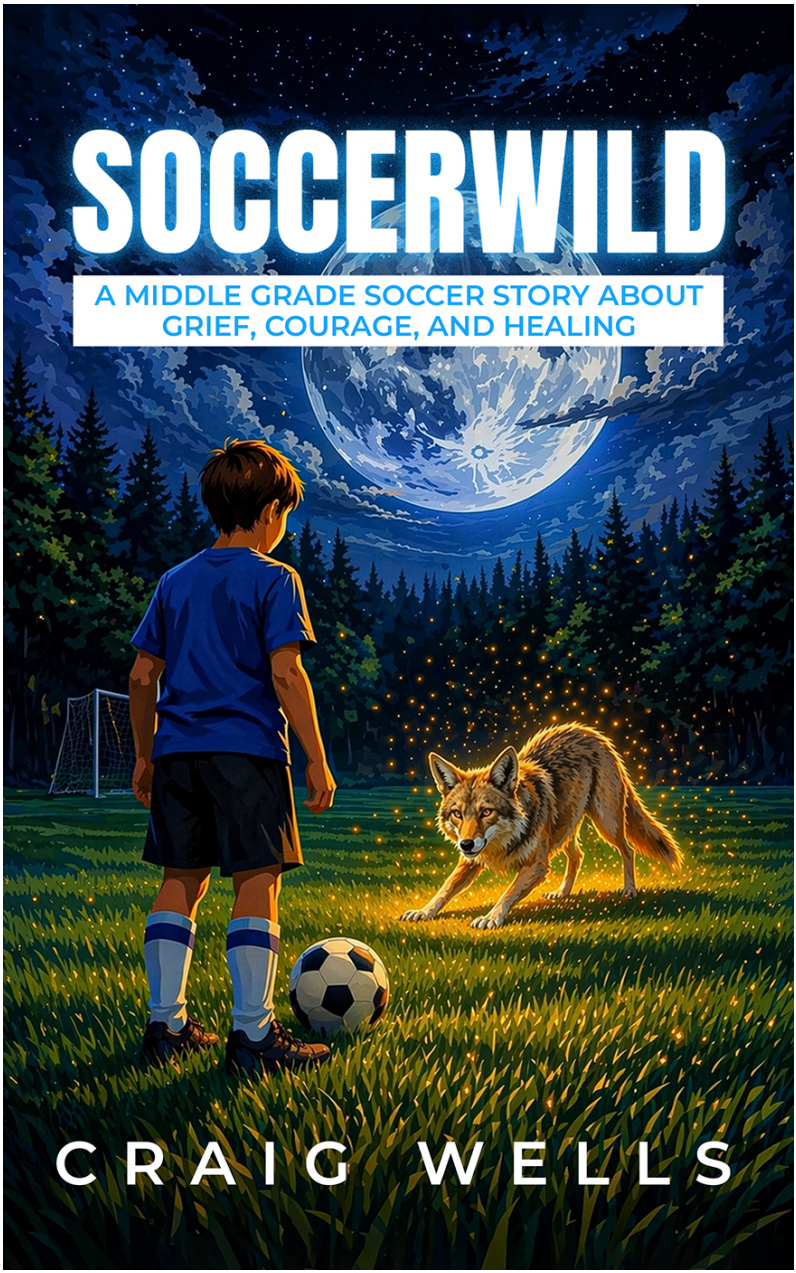
SOCCERWILD
A MIDDLE GRADE SOCCER STORY ABOUT GRIEF, COURAGE, AND HEALING
CRAIG WELLS

wolf trails
follow the words

craig wells

A TRIBUTE TO LIONEL MESSI

SOCCERWILD

by

Craig Wells

“The coyote dances on the edge of the desert, a reminder that life is a series of tricks and tales.”
Native American proverb

soccerwild

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To Eisa, a soccer guru, my friend from Sudan, who showed me the beauty of the game.

To Nagi, the wolf I adopted when I was in my fifties, who showed me how a coyote thinks.

To Lorrinda who mastered the art of the cover like Messi conquers the football field.

SOCCERWILD

A TRIBUTE TO LIONEL MESSI

chapter one

[1]

Far into the glow
of the sun. A
memory. Brighter than
the blustery day
when Mateo
talked me
into. What should
never have
happened.

Little brother. Little
pal. Little. Lots
better than I
will ever
be.

A fiveyearold tongued
tied tiny treasure
triumphing over what
was expected. To

get me to plop
him down
into cardboard box. After
a furious first snow.

When web feet
flop. Hare hops and
squirrel scampers
were buried
beyond our
cares.

Crunch, crunch. Too
big boots made
me laugh.
Little brother
giggled.

Too many runs. Down
the highest
hill. In our
flat bottom town
of 1321 folks.
Dandyville. Oregon.
Box collapsed.
Soggy sides. But
all buts butted
out. After we
tumbled free.

We rose. Sleeves
puffed by snow.
Drool. Purple and
deliciously sweet
from grape bubblegum.
Freeing our icy
lips from
locking up

buts.

Snow tastes better.

Baby brother gleefully
spat out. These
words. Coughed. Teeth
chattered.
Briefly.
Too cold. I worried.

Not too cold.
Just right.

I lied to myself. He was
right. Always was.
As love went.

Another tumble. On
our sides. To the
bottom. Where
he landed on
my belly.

He crawled up. I
hugged him. Can't let go.
He struggled. More.
More, more.
I was twelve. Should
know better.

chapter two

[2]

Dad. As Mom
and Dad. Always
working. Fixing. Leaking
under sinks. Pipes
bubbling up
mud. Glass
shredding dishwasher
pump. At night.
Tending bar
at The Anglers
Club.
To pay for my Timbers

Soccer Club. When
fantasies were
abound. Once mine.
Messi bound. An
Argentine soccer
sensation. Now
Dad's.

Dad. As Dad. Always
preaching. Not
as much. But I
remember how he
did. Everyday. As if
today was
yesterday.

I know how you are.
Soccer, soccer
soccer. Don't let Mateo
wander off. Pull on
a skunk's tail
like our cat's. Waltz
over to a row
of Coke cans. About
to be shot at.

He had no need any
longer. After he
took me
to Church.

Preacher always
preaching. Hearing this and
that. A plea like.
Tears are the language
of grief. It's
okay to
cry.

Makes no sense.

Nothing's okay.

Mateo's gone.

Don't they understand? This
isn't PacMan. Pokémon.

Mario Brothers. This
is Xbox. Mortal
Combat. EA Sports
FIFA. Reason to
me. In a language
of my world.

Don’t make me
translate.
I won’t.

What was in the
Bible? No
words for me.
An ancient
time with ancient
games. Names
important
to make others
feel important.

chapter three

[3]

Empty house. Always
Empty. Empty.
Empty. But those
echoes. Crickets chirping.
Mateo perfectly
mimicked under my
bed. Before.
A critical
match. Or as
a bee buzzing at my
ear. Waking me.
Too darn early.
So I'll study harder
for an algebra
test I was about
to fail. Or pretending to
swallow a preying
mantis on his
tongue. If
I don't let him

be my goalie.
He did! Crying
for minutes
afterwards.

Who had a right to
come into my
room?

No one. Silence can
can be better.
Reminders
can torture.

Dad thinks he
can be better. Than
silence. But lesser than
less frequently.
These hours.

He brings me cream
puffs, eclairs, the
sugaryist sugar
donuts.

All those treats he
denied me.
In training, son. To
be the greatest. You must
sacrifice. We got no
dusty fields. Or
Argentina
Gangs. Or foul
water. We
got what kids like Messi
didn't have.

Now I want words. He
cannot provide.

Not this. Lies.

A virus, son. In his
lungs. Always
been weak.
Like your Grandad.
He died. Young.
A blue baby.

Liar! I want to
shout. You
hate me.

In your face. I can see
what you don't
want to.

Trembling under a
stiff upper
lip. A scornful
glare.
Flickering under
puffy eyes.
Unshaven cheeks.
Flecked with
down feathers he
pounded out of
Mateo's
pillow.

Just say it!

It's your fault.

Silence. If that was
what it took to
get him to
leave.
Good.

I walked to my
bedroom window. I
wished. It was
the second
floor. Third. Better. But
it wouldn't have
stopped me. I
climbed out.

Ran.

chapter four

[4]

Kicking boulders as
soccer balls. Dodging
purple crocus
poking out of
lighter snow. As
midfielders.
Charging a frosty
cobweb between
rhododendron
branches.
As a goalie
net.

In the howl. Of
a blustery
wind. Messi
shouted.

Kick! You fool!

I slid on knees. Into

a bank of crunchy
snow. Head
within. To hide
tears.

All that before. Forever
after. Would be.
What Mateo
had done.
Been.
With
me.

In here. Was no
answer. A
silly place. Mateo
would have
scolded. With a
look. Of
beguiled
charm.

I pulled back. Cried
for him. No more.
No more.
I heard.
Tobias.

Don’t wish for a
blizzard. To
blanket our lives
together. No
more stumbling
about. Looking. For
my tiny boot
dragged off
into deeper
snow.

No hint
of a badly
blown whistle.
But the wind whipping
through the
misty snow. To the
teakettle of Mrs.
Burns. Our grandma.
Dad's Mom.
A thin woman
of mammoth stature. A
choice I would make
without him.
Living in our
guest cottage. Sometimes
forgetting it on
the stove.
Too busy as
an artist. Drafting beauty
out of a stark desert
sky. What a
jackrabbit, tortoise
rattlesnake saw.
As life bloomed
in cactus
flowers.

Blues, yellows
oranges. How she saw
them. I didn't
know how. She
brought them alive.
As the heart. Flesh and
red. Exposed.
Pumping.
Scary. Only
Mateo understood.

No, Mateo. I
can't. Listen. I'm
trying. But it
hurt. When I did. I felt
you. As I sat on the edge
of your bed. You
crawled up
my back. Wrapped
arms around my
neck. Choked
me. Not
funny.
As before. When
I couldn't
breathe.
Scarier. Than when
Grandma crept
up. That
afternoon of
discovery.

chapter five

[5]

Behind you.
Grandma said.

I hurled up.
Around.

With an anger. I've
never felt
before.

Why would you…

Tobias?

In her tone.
Unlike nectar
to the bee. But.
Juice. From the
flesh of cacti spine. With
its sweetness. Able
to quench

the soul. Cool
the anger.
Without
thunder. A clear
sky. A feather
twirling off
a hawk. Caressing
the cheek. With
love. A prey.
Ignored. A kangaroo
mouse. Welcomed
to the safety of
his burrow.

Grandma?

She smiled. Unlike
any others. A
feast of
emotions served as
a single bean
on a clay
plate.

Enough to feed
the world.

With a flick of
a nod. She
added.

Tobias. Look.

I can't.

Don't be silly.

Somewhere. A squeaky
yip. Too much

like Mateo.
Whenever
I tickled his
belly.

Stop. I want to
go home.

A scratch against
gritty earth. A
flicker of
rattlesnake's
tongue.

He's coming.

Grandma rejoiced.

A tug on my
untied shoelace.
Hard enough. To
scare me. I
kicked out.
Too hard.
Missed. Lost my
balance.
Fell back on
my butt.

Grandma flinched. No
longer amused.

You okay? He won't
hurt you.

Legs flopped
about. A coyote pup
leaped into
my chest. Clawed up.

Nipped playfully
my abnormally
bushy
eyebrows.

I snapped my head
back. Cried out.

Grandma!

My mouth.
Agape.
Too inviting.
He licked
off peanut butter
nougat glued to
buck teeth.

Grandma offered. Less
anxiously than
loudly.

Pick him up.

He'll…
Try.

Gingerly. I tucked
my hands
under his legs.
Lifted.

Eyes. Wide. Golden.
Ruptured with
fear.

He squealed. Wiggled.
Snarled. Thrashed
head side to side.

I don’t know why. How.
Who I was. Who
could. But
I whined
sweetly.
Like a
pup.

Ears flat against head.
Back upright. Flat.
Body limp.

Trust. Surrender.
A trick?

I gently set him
down. I folded
in my legs
to protect my *Nike*
Phantom soccer
shoes.

In my mouth. Yuk.

I grumbled.

Will I die?

Grandma smiled.

Ask him.

He curled up on
my lap. After
he sniffed
the dry egg yolk on
my trousers. He
fell asleep.

chapter six

[6]

As before. In automatic
mode. A lesson
learned. Whenever
Mateo asked
about Mom. I
had no answer.
But to. Rub his back. As
Mom did. After I
lost a match. Always
blaming myself.
As the star
striker. Especially if
I sidelined
myself. For a
leg cramp.

I stroked his
fur. Chestnut. Grey.
Wiry soft.
Through burrs,

bits of icy
snow, a beetle
carcass. Stopped.
Disheartened by bird
poop on his
head.

Worse. Different.
Slipping through dog
poo. After I
muffed a block
tackle.

Teammates jeering.
Not allowed to
cry. Walking
home alone.
Alone. As
this pup.

Good. I think we can
move him now.

Grandma encouraged.

Where?

Home.

Whose?

Yours. Of course.

Dad. What will he say?

What he always does.

Too little time for
soccer. As it is.

But you quit.

On my lap, the pup
rotated. Rubbed
poop on my
FC Barcelona sweat
shirt. A
twinge of fury.
Nothing like the
anger. Dad
and I mustered.
After I told
him. Screw this
stupid game.

Then it won't matter
what he says.

I snap.

The pup shot up. With
a startled look.

Oh. Sorry. It's okay.

I moaned. Why should
I care about a
stupid
jersey.

He licked the swollen
knuckle. From
when I punched Messi
smiling on the
wall poster.

Whatever it takes.

I said.

Whatever it takes.

Grandma agreed.

I stopped. Where a
concrete crumbling sidewalk
cut off the meadow. As
brutally as a dry
creek bed.

In my arms, the
pup snapped
at a Monarch butterfly
fluttering by. Too
early. Born out
of season.

Grandma. His Mom.
What if she's
closeby? It's dangerous.

I've been watching.

You have? I wasn't crying.

I didn't think you were.

The pup wiggled. A
slippery salmon
within my
doubt.

I must keep him.

My arms lunged.
Clutched his
back. Drew him
closer. Repositioned
him. As I
stumbled by
Grandma. She
crushed out

a *Camel* cigarette
on her
leathery palm.

He yipped. Howled.
Yipped. A staccato of
fear and distress.

Momma. Where
are you?

He's calling for her!

I cried.

We wait.

We set him down. Run.

We wait.

The pup clawed up
onto my shoulder. Sniffed
my ear. It
tickled out an
automatic
smile.

Dang it. When will
this stop?

He growled. Gently.

Grandma. What's so funny?

He can't figure out
what's hanging
from your ear.

Dad couldn't either.

She laughed harder.

It's a silver…never mind.
You're right. His Mom's gone.
We'll go now.

chapter seven

[7]

We got as far
as Al's *Texaco* gas station.
Abandoned. A relic.
B52. Crop duster.
Your great
granny's
toaster.

Before the pup
finally bit off the dry
blackberry vine
caught on
my sock.

A relief. After he chased
a crow into a black
silk sheet on the
clothesline. Of
Mrs. Paterson.
Once. My

Social Studies
Teacher.
The crow.
Ripping through it. To
the terror. A race
back. By the pup. Imagining
a crow larger
than what the
black held.

Whose smarter now?
Grandma joked. As we
snuck by her *Prius*
pulling into her
driveway.
Chasing after
the pup.

chapter eight

[8]

After he skidded. On
his butt. Through
mud into Doc Winston's
chicken coup.
Feathers furiously
fluttered
everywhere.

Before I stopped
laughing. I
pulled him
out from where
he squirmed under an
overturned
wheelbarrow.

That's lucky.

Grandma said.

We don't want to

irritate Doc. He's retired.
But he'll treat the pup. Other vets.
No way. He is a coyote.

For what? He doesn't act sick.
Not that. He's too young
to lose them.

Tobias. Really?

Well. It's not fair.

For vaccinations.

Oh, sure. Rabies.

In my arms. He chewed
through the cord
to my sweat
shirt. Before he
tackled the
other one.
Already worried if
he swallowed
anymore. I
set him
down.

You sure?

Grandma asked.

He doesn't seem to
want to run off.

I replied. After he
dove into a
gopher mound. Flung
dirt over my
Phantom

shoes.

Shouldn't care about
those either.

I muttered to myself.
Grandma nudged
against me.
Smoke from Dad's
barbeque grill
trailed up
into our
treehouse in the
mammoth old
oak tree.
Before.
Turning any further
into the ghost of
Mateo. I
handed out
the pup.

I can't.

Tobias.

No more burgers. Always.
Burgers. More burgers.
Dad can't cook.

I lied. Why?

Tobias. Please. Paper
plates. Paper
cups. Picnic table.
Being outside. Easier
for him. No
table to
set.

She offered.

Gently. Grandma pushed.
Nursed the pup
against my
chest. He
licked slobbery
tears off my
cheek. She
shifted. Wrapped her
arm around us.
Hugged.

She whispered.
I understand. He can't
do it yet. You still sleep
with his Bluey
blanket
beside you.

He…

It's…

…scarier now. What he
saw, I see…Grandma. A tick.

Crawling in his ear.

She bumped my nose.
Reaching through.
To pluck
it out.

They'll be more.

She said. Pulling back.

But we'll take care of
them. Together.

Stepping back. Her tan
linen dress. Simply
draped. Dust to
earth. To
wildflowers aching
for rain.

Breezy thinning grey
and white
hair wildly willful
where it should
be. A monk.
Perhaps.
An artist. Of
course.

The pup squirmed. Clawed.
Further pulled the
hood to my
sweatshirt over
my head.

I set him down. He
sat. Scratched
his ear.

I worried. There might
be others. Too
many for
Grandma.

We'll go home now.

Okay.

For the first time. Since.
I said the word.

chapter nine

[9]

As Dad sat at
the picnic table.
In his dingy overalls. After
a day under a
house. Add scraggly black
hair. Scruffy
beard tagged with
cobwebs. He
reminded me of
an escaped
convict.

As usual. Three plates
before him. A
burger patty on a
plain bun.
Another bun with
two slices of
tomato.
Lastly. As a

last bite. Seven
bread and butter
pickles. All
taken in
rapid sequence.

I stopped. The pup.
Wrestling with
a sweaty bandana
Grandma accidentally
dumped on his
head. Tumbled into
the back of
my legs.

Where's your plate of
thirteen potato
chips?

I asked.
Without looking up
from his *iPhone*.
He grumbled.

Blown away.

Sounds like a month
of bad luck.

Dad. Scooting. Choking.
Swung his legs
around.

Not funny.

He said. Swallowed tightly.

Sorry.

I got out. With the

strain of okay.

What?

Sorry.

His manhunter,
notoriously cruel,
tenacious. Gripped
his shoulder.
As if a convict. Dad.
Caught. He
slumped over. An
expression of
relief and
sadness.

Dad? You okay?

Out of the damp
dark. Where drips of
mold punished
his fatigue.
He looked up.
With wet
weary eyed regret.
But. Deep
into life's pond. Eyes
as silvery blue
koi. Smacked
by a hint of
light. Love.
A smile. A gentle
ripple. Without any
breeze or fish.
Surfaced.

Well. Well. Well, Tobias.
Who's your friend?

He asked.

Between my ankles. On
his belly. The pup
squirmed.

A coyote pup?

The pup chewed a
caterpillar off
my shoelace. A triumph.
Indeed. By the
exuberance.
of his tail
wagging.

Grandma's idea.

I replied.

Is that right, Georgia?

Dad asked. Reaching
back. To pluck
free a piece
of burger.

Whatever Tobias wants?
Dad leaned forward.
Palm out.

Is that right, son?

We didn't have a choice.

I uttered. A ripple
twitched through my
belly. Dad
believed. We always
have a choice.

He can't be
disappointed
in me.
Maybe you didn't.
But I do.
He said.

Grandma busted in.

Don't, Jackson. He…We
need this.

The pup. Gingerly
licked Dad's
fingertips.

Dad grinned. From a
lifetime ago. A
goal. I blocked. With my
face. A busted
nose. A bloody rag
tacked over my
bed. To
remind me.
Champion.
Inspire
me.

We'll call him Wheaties.
Breakfast of Champions.

Dad said.

Wheaties!

Grandma and I
chimed in.

The pup. Smacked
his lips. Unsure

if he liked the
taste of
burger.

How about Diego?

Dad added.

The pup leaped up
onto the table. Sniffed
tomatoes. Snorted. Slammed
paws down on
them. Scooted
the plate off.
Onto Dad's
lap.

Dad?

A smile. Weak. But
a smile. Enough
to remind
me. How.
Coming back
from our
laundry room.
He grinned.
Blood won't come
out. Son. Said
with the love
I always
prayed for.

Grandma beat me to
my words.

You sure?

Why not?

He offered. As Diego.
Finally. Snarling.
Gently growling. Tugged
out a tuft of
insulation from
his hair.

At each other. Grandma
and I looked. A
painting. Sun
submerged.
Peeking out above
cliffs to color
the sky with pastels
of hope and
wonder. She barely
bettered me. In
its depiction.

chapter ten

[10]

Afternoons. Without
soccer. Were
Sundays.
Without church.
With Diego.
Everyday.

He followed me.
Everywhere.
Why? A
raw chicken
leg. A handful of
blueberries. A
last lick of
my peppermint
ice cream.
Pressured by Dad.
To rid Diego of
his foul
breath.

Nope. Didn't
believe so.

A dash anywhere. As a
breeze. I became.
To trigger out
an aroma.
Intriguing Diego.
Not car exhaust. Not Mrs.
Petersen's burnt
berry bundt
cake. Not
Grandma's lavender
fabric softener fumed
out of the dryer
vent. But a scent
he knew as his ancestors
did. A mystery to
me. The highlight of
our moment
together.

Shoes fascinated him. He
worshiped them.
Chewed on
them. Hid them. Peed
on a select few.
Hauled them
around. Treasures.
To him. Rescued by
my feet. As they
splashed. Through.
Ponds. Puddles.
Where a
frog hopped out. Of
perfectly percolated
mud. Deliciously
speckled with

what matters.
Tromped.
Through meadows.
Swamps of
leaves. Field
mouse. Mole. To delight
the possibility. Of
speedier capture.
Snake. Salamander.
To tickle paw pads
beyond curiosity.
Bushes.
Thrushes. Thrashed
out. A leapier
leap away.
Quail fluttering.
Skipping across a
trail lost. Diego.
Back to me.
A look. Panting
wasted. But
wanting
more.
As I did.

Skipping classes. Missing
meals. Blowing off
friends. Lying.
Wearing a knee brace
to school. Why no
soccer? Acting
out an excuse. I could
not come up with
before. Why no
to Mrs. Petersen's
daughter.
Dolores. To be her

boyfriend. Or
even share
another lunch
together. With laughter.
We once had. Split
a Dad sandwich.
Cut into quarters.
A square of
Provolone. Two
slices of
Pepperoni. Three
small chili
peppers. Lined up
in a triangle.
Four dabs
of Italian dressing.
But why.
Alone.
Ask the nights without
sleep. When the
moon blew in
light. To
entice shadows
to dance about. As
softly. Mateo
tiptoeing in.
To whisper. I wet
the bed. Will
Dad be
mad?

Answer me why.
A moldy
donut hole
discovered in
shorts I only wore
when spring

got hotter.
As now. Sugar
and cinnamon. A spice
I hated. Mateo
loved.
Ask me why.

Diego. Walk with me
after midnight.
Give me a
sense of your
wonder.

You are coyote. Growing
bolder. A cuddly
pup. You
never were.
Wiser than ducklings
waddling behind
Mom. Into
rapids.

But love enough. You
sometimes shared
with Grandma.
At her house.
When I was
at school.

Voices of humor.
She recalled.
A crow in her
studio. Diego thought
he caught. Outmatched.
Out scratched. Out
pecked. Diego
ended up
slumped

on her feet. Muzzle
peppered with
blue after
wings brushed into
wet paint on her
canvas on an
easel.
Screeches of damn,
dammit. Followed
days later. By
Diego. Leaping
back from a teakettle
hissing. Into an
armload basket of
freshly plucked
eggs. A win
for him. As he lapped
up what splattered
on the floor. An
afterthought
for Grandma.
Did he plan
this?

All this. No surprise
for me. In June. At
five months. Its
novelty. Of a
cute coyote.
Turned to
instincts. A
wild heart
pumping clout
and agility. Purpose
into lean, long
slender legs.
A dash

across a log. Into
our pond. To
leap and catch a frog
before it hit.
Ears high
and erect. Towers
tuned to what
electrified
the air. A twitch. A
single blade
of grass. Where
he pounced.
Dug. To oust a mouse
nest. Where he
lapped up
the pink
babies. As he did
those egg
yolks.

Too much. Too
much for me. For my
first afternoon
during summer
break. Too
little time.
To enjoy his wily
winsome dodges out
of my world.
But this. Today.
Mateo's birthday.
Too much.

chapter eleven

[11]

Never a collar. Never
a leash. Rather a
firm grip on
the scruff
of his neck.
Rather
endure the nips. Gentle
growls. As I led him
back home.

Too much. Today. He
should be free. To
love me. Trust
me. Trust
him to
go home.

Passing by Mrs. Petersen's
laundry line. Before
Dolores looked

over. As she
posed her friend. Billie.
I think.
Outfitted only in a
relic. Even for
Grandma.
A mink fur coat. Against
a white sheet.
Spattered with blood.
To snap.
An Instagram
post. I let Diego go.
Before she
saw me with a
coyote. I
ducked
around her Dad's
tree chipper.
Idling.
Chugging. A fifties
diesel train at
the depot.
Must have terrified
Diego. I raced
after him.
Not even close
behind. A
loser. As
fans for the
winners blocked me
from fleeing
the field.

A call. From me.
Diego! Come
back! Stop!
Before a

truck. Strikes
you.

I round the corner
of our street.

Diego. Nowhere.
Long ago. Long
before I reached our
front porch.
Fatigued beyond
sanity. Dad
bawled.

Diego! Give it back!

I charged up the
steps.

Diego. Please.

He begged.

I busted into
the house. From
a bedroom. Dad
moaned.

Ah. Diego. Why today?

I rushed forward.
Reluctantly.

Dad sat on Mateo's
bed. Hands
clasped to knees. To
anchor his
heart. Somewhere
else than the
loss.

I stopped. To briefly
focus. On the
poster.
Curling off the
wall. Down over. To
hide the face
of Yoganada. A
high priest
of some Buddhist
cult.

Dad?

He looked up.

*He has Bushy Bear. I don't
know how he found him.*

Mateo's teddy. Bear.

Dad scooted away from
the corner of
the bed. He
left a wad of
soggy tissues. His
hay fever. I
hoped.

I walked over. I sat on
them. I spoke.

Sorry. It's not okay.

It has to be.

I cocked my head. Glanced
over at the man. I
forgot to love.
Since Diego.

I spoke.

You're wearing…your Packers jersey…you're going back…to the sports bar. Tonight.

He looked at me. I
was the son. Of
midnight
raids. To *7Eleven*.
Snickers'
milk shakes.
Nachos. Lip lickily
luscious with
slimy cheese.
After the limbs of
our mammoth oak tree
trapped the soccer
ball. Before the
treehouse. Built.
Before mom
fled.

Soccer, son.

I don't want to play.

I understand.

You do?

Diego. Reminds me. How.
Your Mom loves you.

Dad. She left us.

An anger rose in
me. Subtlety. She never
came to any of my
matches. But

expected me
to attend
classes
at some Yogi
temple.

I never did.

How can you say that?

Now. Diego?

He's taken you away
from me. As did.
Yoganada. Seduced her
away from
us.
Dad. I don't understand. He's
a coyote. I don't even know
if he'll stay. I'm not
going anywhere.

Dad glanced over. He
can't be searching
for a tissue.
Dad. Never
cries.

He frowned. All the
scabs. On my
hands.
From coyote
bites.

He bowed back. A
fatigue deepening his
sorrow. A
wretchedness
surfacing. Drip.

Drip. From a
leaky pipe.
He must go
back. A
floor joist too low.

Too late in
the day. To
duck. A son. As
well. He could
not imagine
how. To
talk to him. If
he felt the
same.

chapter twelve

[12]

He spoke. Barely above
the range hood.
Rattling in the
kitchen.

I'm not smart. Like your
Mom. She was
right to go
to India.

I thought…

She was never happy
with us. Maybe
like Diego. Someday. Hope
not too soon. He'll return
to the wild.

But om?

She'll never forget you.

Do you think she knows?

I don't know how she could.

Would it matter?

I don't know.

From our kitchen.

Grandma cried.

On the stove! Burnt to the
bottom of the pot!

Diego trotted in. He
sat. Dropped
Bushy Bear.

Unharmed.

I jumped off. Rushed
to him. Ears flattened against
head. Scowling mouth
approaching a grin.

Tobias! Be careful!

I understood. Dad
didn't.

Diego wanted
to play.

He batted Bushy
Bear.

Grandma stormed
in. A swirl of
orange, yellow
red paint

within Diego's snout
printed on the
thigh of
her jeans.

Corn beef. Cabbage.
What a stink. No
wonder Diego came to
find me. Stopped
a fire.

What!

I exclaimed.

Came in with Bushy Bear.
Chased after him. Into
the kitchen.

With a hint. Of a
sigh. Dad and
I chimed in.

Ohhhh.

Diego boosted his
head up. Let out a yip
yippidy yip howl.
Cracked the
moon with
a smile.
Exposed us.
As a premier.
To giggles.
I might experience.
After a first kiss.
Or shoulder
slaps. After a
soccer shoe

flew off. To kick
in a goal. To
howls of laughter.
Worst yet. But
as hilarious.
After I strode out
onto shore. To
tug up trunks.
Already lost to the
wave. I rode
magnificently.
As the body
surfer. Dolores
briefly.
Applauded.

Dad's tears. Struck
me with his
joy. As
he quaked
himself off the
bed. Onto
his butt.
Grandma's bewildered
look. Too
hard laughter
choked her
lungs. Those dang
Camels.

Nothing funny there.
I clutched Dad's
shoulder. As
my anchor.
A man.
Who could.
Never die.
Disappear.

Diego turned. Raced
out of the room.

A knock on the front
door. My name
called out.

Dolores.

Here?

chapter thirteen

[13]

I stopped at the door.
From the kitchen. While
Diego scraped his
teeth against
the bottom
of the steel pot.
Safely away.
I opened it.

Tobias. It's…

It is.

Thought you might want…

Thanks.

In her best mirroring
of Beyoncé. As
Beyoncé. At
leisure. In a simple

stylish. Gold
and white checkered
sundress. With a
slit halfway up
the thigh.
Still. Her silky
hair. Eloquently
braided. Twisted with
gold.

I took a
deep breath.
Waited.
Forever. If
possible.

Until.
I could figure
out what
I felt.
Dolores was a
year older
than me.
A circumstance
I never considered.
Until then.

All I could do. Scratch.
The top. Of my
head. Twice.

She handed out a plate
of curly fries. Out of
sweet potatoes.
From scratch.
Sprinkled
with chili pepper
and sea salt.

Mom knows these were
your favorite. You
could share a
memory.

Third time.
Then hunched over
and smelled
a nasty glob of
mouse organ. Diego
earlier this
morning drooled on
my jersey. I
frowned.

She replied. Before a
sneeze. After she
rubbed the back
of her hand
sprinkled
with chili powder.
Against her
her nose.

Sorry. I told Mom. Too
early for you
guys.

Paw steps. Closer
than I wanted
them to be.

We…I can…take them
back. Don't tell her.

I shot up.

Sorry. Got to go!
I blurted.

O……

I slammed the
door. Shut.

chapter fourteen

[14]

I whipped around. In
the kitchen doorway.
Diego. Stiff tail
wedged between legs.
Settled onto
his belly.

I can't let anyone
see you.

He sprung up. Leaping
high enough. To
bump the
ceiling fan. Hard
enough to
ignite the blades
to turn as
they haven't
for years.
Flew forward.

Landed on me.
Light enough
to catch him. Hold
him. Feel his
fur as my
own. Absorb
his scent. Take
his breath
from him.
A sensation. Riveting
nerves to his
will. A brush with
death. Eminent.
But faraway.
A flicker of a
mouse tail. Before
it dove into
a hole.
A possum. To a
limb beyond
reach. A
chick bursting from
an egg. To the
fury of wings
chasing him away.
An escape. Assumed.
Validated.
Celebrated. To
Squeak. Sneeze.
Screech. Be
thankful. For
the immaturity
of the pup.
Diego.
Who believed. In
me. To let
him go. Set him

down. Walk
away. Even if I didn't
believe I could. At
that moment.

So. He let me
know.
He nipped my nose.

chapter fifteen

[15]

In July. Another
birthday. Of
mine. Slipping by as
a miser. With no
joy to spare.
Traveling alongside Diego.
With hermitage
instincts.
Betrayed by summer.
Tall grass cowered
from its heat.
Nowhere to
hide.

Soda, beer cans
glittered everywhere.
Littered by
pursuers. Of picnics,
hikes, volleyball
nets. Insulting

the sun. Out
to show us. Slippery
sleek, brilliantly
green backs
of frogs on
rocks. Or
those billowy
breezes. Bringer of
bees bouncing
by. We celebrated.
The cool air
as well.
Foretold what awaited
us. After midnight.
After what happened with
Dolores. Almost
discovered.
Kid and
coyote.

Into the night. We
ventured beyond
the drudgery
of hours.
Before walls and
clocks. To
finally emerge
revived. Alone
in my quest
for Diego's
cheer.

Dad. Tending
bar every night.
Till close. Home even
later. So
we chose
the swoops of

bats. Life
of pesky raccoons
in dumpsters.
Rather than
silly sleep.

chapter sixteen

[16]

That night. We
strayed into the far
edge of Huntress
Park. Inside chain link
fencing collapsed
into rust. Among
branches.
Leaves. City crews
dumped.
Where Diego
romped. Through
slumping mounds of
cut grass. Safely
away. To
unearth critters.
Sneeze. Snort.
Suffer the indignity
of nostrils
clogged. Before. A
cry disrupted

laughter.

Tobias! Coyote!

Tromping. Slipping.
Bounding out.
Of a mound.
I dashed.
Frantic. Terrified.
We'd be
discovered.

Hurry!

Eli added. As
frantic.

I glanced back.
Diego. Vole plugged
inside cheek.
Hopped over the
mound. Out
of sight.

I approached. Trembling.
As unintentionally.
Fearful. I
said.

Wow. Eli. That was
close. He ran off. Cause
of you.

Yeah. Well. Yeah. What were doing
in that crap?

Thought I spotted a soccer
ball buried. Like. I
don't know. It's
sacrilegious. Or somethin'.

Ah, get that. I think.

Eli. Much taller than
me. A goalkeeper. In the
future. An Olympian.
For sure. A
teammate. Since we
were four. Lanky
arms. One or
the other. Always
crushing a
soccer ball. For
muscle
tone. Eli.
Determined. Dedicated.
As I once was.
Propped himself
up. With a
hiking
pole.

Eli?

Yeah. Knee. Like you. How
come? You're better?
Surgery?
Nope. Fighting through it.

Be back then. Soon?

I don't know. You?

Like you. Fighting through
it. Not sleeping. Can't
look at myself. It's not me.
Don't want to change clothes.
Same jersey. Shorts.
From that…I'm
not a showoff.

But…

I nod.

You got it. Tobias. Run through
mud. Slop. Whatever
it takes.

I can't answer.
Enough of the lies.
I cringed.
Eli. My best
friend. He
once took a
Coke can to the
back of his
head. Tossed by an
irate Dad. After
a match loss
by his son.
After
weeks of
measles. Eyes
squinted shut.
I read to him. So
he would not
fail. Steinbeck's Of
Mice And Men. For
English. Lincoln's
legacy for
Social Studies.
Algebra. I
let Delores. His
sister. Cover
that. But.
Never an
age. Without
conflict.

An Xbox 360. Used. In
its original box. I lugged out
of a dumpster. Eli.
Standing by.
Wishing. We
were six.

Contests. To
climb the highest.
On the riskiest
branches.
Toward a hawk's nest.
Reaching first.
Eli. Daring
me. Loser
eat all. The egg
he looted.

Even better. At
nine years
old. Like
Dad. His Dad.
Challenged.
By their peers.
To munch the hottest
pepper. While
at a barbeque.

We joined them.
Outside. Their perimeter.
Of beer and sunken
frayed web seats.
For us. Milliseconds
counted. Before
lunging for
the play pool. Water.
For a soda can.
Wedged between our

knees. After
chewing a ghost
pepper.
Eli. Always the
winner. The
testament. To
make me
better.

Eli. My best
friend. Maybe.
I should tell him. About
Diego. Before he
runs off.

Eli punctured a
snail. With the tip
of the pole.
Between two
toes.

You still pissed?

He asked. Then
added as
hotly.

Don't tell me. You don't
miss her.

Don't really think about it.

Liar. You loved her. She was fun.
For Christ's sake. Not like
a Mom.

I don't know. I got this…

…What? Nothing can replace her.
No one. Admit it.

Why are you doing this?

He furrowed his face. About
to block a penalty
kick. Missed.
Wept tears.
In face
only.

Eli? What is it?

Mom's sick. Can't stop coughing. Our
crappy school. Ceiling
leaks. No heat.
No air.
Mold.

She should quit.

She won't be back. I'll
make sure. To that stupid
school.

She'll get better.

She will. You ever hear from your Mom?

I shook my head. Finally
took my hands out
of pockets.
They stayed
fisted. Eli
understood. He
withdrew. Into
the comrade
who knew.
When. As
I rummaged.
Through Mom's

clothes. To
find the perfect
blouse to bring her
back. Eli. The
master of
grief. Hugged me
up and away.

That coyote. You think
it's the one spotted around
old Doc Winston's barn?

He asked.

Diego?

I muttered under
my breath.

I got to go.

I said.

Sure. Get it. Sorry. It's
just that…

I turned and
hustled
off.

She'll be fine!

I shouted.

She'll come home!

He returned.

chapter seventeen

[17]

After I scaled the grassy
mound. I rushed
after Diego
ducking
under a thorn
ravenous
tangle of blackberry
vines. Without
a scratch. As
miraculously as where
I discovered
Diego.

He sat. Calmly. Before
the irrigation
ditch. I
walked over.
Sat. Crosslegged
beside him.
Wishing.

Yearning for a lick
on the ear. A
paw on
the shoulder. He
glanced over. Lips purple
from blackberry juice.
Enough. Of love.
Enough to
bring a
smile.

He looked back to
the rumbling
water.

Well, what's so interesting?
I asked. Though I
knew. Why.

Close to here. Mom
and I sat. We
watched. Created. A
game of what
traveled by.

Who could predict. Before
it reached us. What
brand. From
what store. Fast food canteen.
Can of crap. Mom
smirked. Origin
of wrapper. To go box.
Cup. Paper or
plastic. Insignia.
Helium balloon. Drifting by.
To insult her.
Me. Not so
much.

But. What
fascinated
Diego?

I squinted.
Through
tears.

A soggy. Furry critter.
Snagged by a
root protruding out
of crumbling
concrete.
Its glassy plastic
eye. Black. Glared back
a memory. A
glossy blackened
toenail. After
Mom stubbed
her toe. Wonderful
Mom. Always the
klutz. Clown.
Manic mover of
emotions. Caused
too much love
for her. Alone with
it. After a wild
but steady
gait. Away.

Mom. You should be.
Here. For me.

I staggered up. Sloshed
through the current.
Waist high. Grabbed the
bear or dog or wolf.
Turned. Decided

to be carried
away. Only
for a moment.

I waded back. A dragon
kite bumping my
my hip. I stretched
the creature out.

Better for you. Than will
ever be for me.

He sniffed. Snorted.
Sat. A paw scratched
off blackberry
seeds from
his snout.

I tossed it. Watched.
Expected it.
To refuse to
sink. It
sank.

Want to go home?

He got up. Stretched
luxuriously. I
climbed out. Marched
off. He nipped
my butt. Gently.
I pinched. Out
a grin.

Enough. To stop me.
From sobbing.

chapter eighteen

[18]

In dreams, you
dream yourself out
of cages. A
talking coyote to
persuade you
to be free.
So said. Grandma in
her red wine
stupor. As
Diego chewed. Into
her cotton satchel. Prized
peaches. Finally ripened.
Leaking. A mouthful
of peach and
cotton. He
growled
back. As Grandma
grumbled.
Spied me.
Winced.

Asked.

Another nightmare?

I shook my
head.

Another lie. Lying to
Grandma. Confessing to a
pastor. Only God.
If there is one.
Can know.

My dream. Always
returning. To
put me on
the best, baddest
brawniest mountain
bike. Money
can buy.
Bouncing. A bucking
bronco. But not on
rock. Terrain.
Or through ruts.
But on the surface
of the moon.
Staying on. Triumphantly.
Skilled. A snowboard
cross racer.
Shouts. Everywhere.
Outraged.

Helmet! Helmet!
Where's your
helmet?

On head! DumbAss!
I bellow back.

Helmet! Helmet!
Helmet! It's
God. Calling
out. Why
should He care?
I chased off
Mom. Killed my
brother.
He
answered me. The
only voice. I've never
heard before.

You didn't. Get a
tactical helmet.
DumbAss.
God giggled.

chapter nineteen

[19]

Last evening.
I woke. Kicked. To
get the sheet
off. Too
sweaty. Got tangled.
Angrier. Tumbled
off the bed.
Rolled about. I'm
on fire.

For Diego. Became
a sublime game.

He grabbed the edge.
Yanked it off.
I sat up.

I think. Should I?
With God's permission.
I grouched.

I'm winning but not winning
for them. I don't hear but
I'm listening. I'm doing
what they want. But
it's never enough.

I looked to
Diego. If he
nodded.
I'd believe. In
God.

Backing up. He
dragged the sheet. Shook
his head. Rump
against the
door. He stopped.
Stepped into
a bay of moonlight.
Sinking. Out of
the skylight. Eyes
soared upward.
Into its shy
luminosity.
Igniting a
wild. He
knew.
Ached for.
A duck bill under
water. A bee
through a
wild tiger blossom.
A ladybug inside
a dandelion
stem. A
way out of this
room.

I got up.

The hell with it.
Let's go.

chapter twenty

[20]

An owl's life for
us. Without
the hoots. A midnight
romp. To scoff
at signals.
Whether manmade.
Or squawk
of hawk.
Our breaths. Alone.
To shut out
the world.
Free. My
friend. Free.
To run from me.
Without a
worry.

Where are you
Diego? What mischief?
What challenge

has the wind
posed? A tumbling
petrified sparrow
to chase?

Diego. I
am right behind
you. Turning
the corner. Where
you fled. To
my dismay.

Out of wet glossy
grass. Betrayed by
moonlight. He
trotted across our
club's soccer
field.

Drop it!

I cried.

He'd never listened
before. He must
now.

He approached. Ducked
tail between legs.
Dumped a
soccer ball. At
my feet.

A gift? An offering?

With a force of all
the fury. Of
before.
After.

I kicked
it.

He leaped out.
Blocked it. With his
shoulder.
It rolled by.

Diego sank on his
belly. Ears plastered
against his head.
Tail erect.
Ready. No sound. No
twitch. A piercing
snarling nod to
the soccer
ball.

Oh, yeah. You think.

I cocked leg.
Rivetted. Tightly
wound. Juice to the
thirsty.

His tail flittered.

Out burst emotions.
I'd buried.

A whoop, whoopy
whoopie wildly
yelled. Yearning feet
to toetapping
jest to test
the kick
to end the
world.

A jitterbugging of
nerves. To
dance. Excel.
Shoulders bobbing banjo
brewing joy to the
boiling point.

I struck. Scuffed
the turf. Dumped
the ball into
a midair
thump.

Diego leaped. Ably
bumped it
back. Tumbling over
tracks of crows,
pigeons. Enjoying the
sprinklers on.
Rather
than fellow
players.

Got all night. You?

chapter twenty-one

[21]

He sat. Sniffing out
the moon. For
its signal.
To howl
ahead.
I smiled. Feeling
here. Within
the elation. Of the
game. Wrestling
with its fervor.
Diego. If I
kick. Viciously. Could
he? Be hurt.

I dodged. The
urge.

I danced right. Heel
tapped the ball. Whirled
around. To

face Diego.

He lunged. I looped
the ball over
him.

Raced on. In a zigzag
rout. Defined
without
angles.

With grace. Accuracy.
I never imagined
possible. Here.
There. Everywhere.
Back. Further
forward. The
ball inches
away. Barely
touched.
An ally. Enemy.
Always. Eyes to the
sky. Across grass.
A dragonfly. Darting.
Deceptively random.
Skimming above
the surface
of a pond.

Fighting off
Diego. I
chased a white
god. Sometimes
loving me.
Often.
Testing me.
Tobias.
If you bow

before
me. I
will race
away. If you
respect me.
I will betray
you. Diego.
You coyote. You
will be my
God.

He nipped ankles.
Calves. Hopped
in front. Expecting. As
Diego would. To
tackle me.
Fool. Full of
foolhardy
antics. I
scooped up the
ball. Leaped
with it.
Executed a
moderately sublime
bicycle
kick. Into a
flurry of
gnats.
Our only.
Audience.

chapter twenty-two

[22]

For many nights.
We returned.
To best this night.
Never to be
bested.

What made
it better.

So said. Messi.
I imagined.
Offered in
a dream.

Champions. Champion
their gift to play.
Never the
rule.

Practice makes perfect.

When there was
time. But not
this day.

Dad day. His
birthday. A party.
To honor
him. As he should
be. Grandma. Creating
a mammoth banner.
Letters basking
in desert
sunsets. As
they should. Words.
To highlight the
beauty of Dad's
generosity. To our
neighbors. In
years past.

During a torrential
hailstorm. With
his body. He
shielded Martha.
Our 911. Late
night operator.
Crippled by
rheumatism. Before
he carried her
up her porch.
Finally. Surrendering
to his gallantry.

Martha came. With his
favorite 3 layer
creamy custard cocoa
cake. Painfully
prepared.

Followed by the Bumster
brood. Jack. Justin.
Nick. Falcon.
Bright boys. With
different Dads.
A single Mom. 27.
No longer
defined by her
circumstances. By
God or human. Losing
her house. To the
freak wildfire
of 2022. Dad. Engineering
the rebuild. Brothers
joining. Learning
a trade.

They brought back his
tools. Borrowed.
With broad
grins. As
Falcon rolled in
a beer keg.
Jack trailed. A
stainless steel kettle.
Full of silver
dollars.
Wrapped by
even brawnier
arms.

All this. These.
More. Before.
Waiting. For
the proper moment.
To thank him.
Dad drinking. Drunk.
Drunker. To

feel grateful. Blessed.
Nothing else. Late
into the night.

They did not
give up. I
worried. Diego
locked in Grandma's
old *Chevy* cargo van. I
instructed her
days ago
to park far away
at the soccer
field. Diego
inside. Accompanied by
a lamb leg bone.

chapter twenty-three

[23]

Until 3:45
AM. When the
festivities
ended. Love
drifting
off. Clouds.
As well. Letting
out the moon.
A howl. A referee
whistle. I
hustled off.

Diego. I sighed.

I tugged open
the cargo door.
An empty
space. Other
than the shadow of
me. The moon

served up. A
warning of
how lost
I would be. Without
Diego. A bucket
of water. Barely
touched.

Diego!

I shrieked.

Diego. Gone.
Kidnapped.
Freed.
Remorse. Punched
me in the gut.
Knocked me
to knees.

Sorry. Could never be
loud enough. To
silence my
guilt.

How I. Acted. After
he chewed up
my *Phantom* soccer
shoes. Pissed on
the corner of
my bed. Bit
ear. If I refused
to wake
up. Spit up a
halfeaten
toad. On my
pillow.

I bowed. Deeper. After

a cricket. Loudly
chirping. Crawled
up the back of
my neck.

Ah, Diego.
Maybe it was for the
best. But what
if? Shot.
Euthanized.

Run. You fool. Hunt.
Everywhere.

I jumped up.

Chirping. Muffled
under my hair.
A steady
velvety growl.
Louder.

Diego. Displeased.
Peered around
the front bucket
seat. Honked
the horn.
Snarled.
Annoyed.

Sorry. Dad needed this.

He ducked back. Curled
up on the seat.

Okay. Maybe later.
I turned. Strolled
off. To join the
object of my affection.

The ball. On
grass. Dry. Crunchy.
From our 5 year
drought. River to
creek. To a
trickle.
Why this night?
Green dully
illumed.
By a passive
moon. Coyly
recoiled behind
whispery
clouds. A
reminder
of Diego.
Shy. Leery of
me. Those
first few
weeks.

But. He came
around.

I flipped up the
ball. Butted
it with my forehead.
Against knee.
Kicked it up. Back
and forth. Knee
to other knee. To
forehead. Faster.
As accurately.
A romp. With even
strides. Thrashing
through brush.
Scraping back under
low limbs. After a

jackrabbit. A
few meters
behind
Diego.

Ball. High above
forehead. Descending.
I kicked. A dart.
A rocket. On
its way to a
goal of a lifetime.
Hurrahs. Howls of
glorious cheers.
Explode. Diego
leaped. Whirled around.
Blocked it with his
hip. Landed.
Trotted. Back to
the ball. Sat.
I tugged my jersey
back down.

Game on.

A redtail hawk landing. A
jackrabbit dashing
sideways. A river otter
bobbing. The ball.
Dust. Rock.
Water.
Coyote. Front paws
pounded it.
Skipped.
Skidding. Corners. By its
delight. Head
bunting it
away. I
was. A mob

of antics.
Stumbling. Charging.
Hopping.
A clown to the
ethics. Of a
coyote.
But able.
Occasionally.
To gain control.
The art of
soccer. Missed.
Opportunities. Even to
the craftiest
predator.
We never quit.
How could
we?

chapter twenty-four

[24]

Daylight broke. Subtlety. Without
a care in the world. We
also felt. Though exhausted.
Wired for more. One
last skill. To
shock the
sun.

A sliding tackle.
Diego. Bounding.
Bouncing off
my chest.
I was up. Charting
the ball with grace.
Fleet friendly
feet. Toward a
white web.
Where.
Diego waited. Spider
to butterfly.

I kicked. He
leaped. Twirled.
Curled. Sucked up by
a tornado. His
snout. Deflected the
ball outside
the net. I
was near to tears.
Collapsed to
knees.
Laughing.

Diego trotted over. Teeth
clamped on ball.
Punctured.
Finally
deflated.

Let's go home.

chapter twenty-five

[25]

Dad met us at the
door. A mug of
iced coffee
pressed against
a temple.

Out early?

Out of breath. I
nodded. Let
Diego chew
my untied
shoelace.

Quite a party.

He said. I replied.

It's a week late.

They don't have to know.

It's cause of Mom. Isn't it? She always forgot your birthday. Why you can't forget her.

Passing by me,
he spoke.

You should be more careful. Come back before light.

Huh? You knew.

Two steps down the
porch. He added.

We should move.

What? Move. From this house. Dad?

Three steps from his
truck.

What? What was that?

I begged.

He got in.

Dad!

Diego furiously lapped
up water. In the
kitchen.

Diego! Stop! I can't hear him!

He drove off.
I didn't have to
hear. I understood.
This was Mom's
house.

Walls of shadowy
lilac. Or deeply infused
with frosty
yellow. Daffodils. Too
early. Defiantly
drooped
by snow. Chairs
she upholstered with
Navaho blankets. A
couch. Purely
white. Skinned with
cotton. From
India. Silky
soft. Knickknacks.
Collectibles. From her
past life. Everywhere.
To haunt us.
Hummel figurines.
Ceramic. Silly
boys and girls. In
even sillier
outfits.
Fragrances. Delicate.
Pungent. Earthy.
Soaking into
anything. That
didn't move.

But to leave this?

I must bring back
Grandma. From

Taos. New
Mexico. Where she
worshipped.
Georgia O'Keefe.
So she could
recharge her
soul. Desert.
Air. Sand. Sky.
Colors. She
claimed.
Rattlesnake
bites. As God.
God. Healing
her.

Huh?

But first. Catch up
on what mischief.
Diego was up to.
Then sleep.

chapter twenty-six

[26]

Wandering out on
our late night
romp. With
no sleep. No
moon. I
packed a
flashlight. A
water bottle. Four
energy bars.
A coyote.
Rather than my
iPhone. I
left behind.
Afraid. I'd delete
Mom's last
message.

Why a leash? A
collar? Diego
glanced up

furtively.
Only after blocks
walking. He
failed to
writhe. Thrash
free.

I grimaced. With no
way to explain
why. Having
a Mom. Always the
worrier. Her
badgering. Coaxed
me. To prepare
for the worst.

I wanted. To so
much. Please
her.

Why now?

Too ridiculous.
I thought. To
be blocks away. With
provisions.
If lost. But a
coyote. On
a leash.
Mom would
stop me.
Probably.

I reached our
soccer field.
I sighed.

The world did
not crash in

on me. I
unclipped the.
Paused.

Diego. A subtle
growl.

Eli slapped my
back.

Damn. Bro. It's
true then.
Cooool.

Diego ducked back
between my
legs.

Let 'em rip!

He shouted.

Stadium lights exploded. Moon
as sun. Grass.
White hot.
Green. Evaporated
into stark
punishment for
the eyes.

I squinted. Breathless
to the shock.

Eli shoved his *iPhone*
into my face. A
ghostly flash
of Diego.
Twirled. By the
tornado.

You're…..a…hell…I don't know.

Diego leaped. Clutched
his wrist. I waited. Not
intentionally. I
think. He
drew blood.
I yanked him
down. By
the collar. He
yipped.

Eli cried out.

Dolores! Got that!

I winced. Never hurt him
before. I recoiled
from guilt into
anger.

I strode off.
Stomped on his
phone. Not
intentionally.
Up to Dolores.
Closeby.
With a precious
grin. I always
wanted
before.

Isn't it great? Thousands. On
Instagram. Because of me. Well.
You. Of course.

Under my arm. I crushed
the soccer ball. A
headlock of

all who
betrayed us.

You did this?

I snarled. She
flinched. Withdrew
into a why.

You ruined everything. They'll
come after us. Nothing
good will come of this. I just
wanted to play soccer.
Diego. They'll take
him away.

We won't let them. Don't
you see? He's a star.
You are. Isn't that what
you wanted? Now
with soccer. You
can forget. Look. In the
stands. They came
for you. Now.
Just perform.
What you
love.

I shut out the voices.
Hers.

Diego.
Me. All of
what was left.
Now alone.
Without Diego. I
must set him
free. I walked off.
The leash

stayed on. If. We
were to end up
where he
needed
to be.

Wait! Don't go!
You can't!

I glanced back. I
really loved her. Always
will. But not
here. Now.

Eli tenderly. Clutched
her arm. She
leaned her
love into
him.

It's okay. It's not your
fault. He'll figure
it out.

He said.

I know.

chapter twenty-seven

[27]

Beyond the soccer
field. On the
outskirts of
Dandyville. Where
schoolbuses detour home.
Into a dark. On
the edge of
woodlands prowled by
cougars. Within
its eerie silence. The
solitary hoot of
an owl. Hushed
by a gun shot.
I stopped. Squatted.
Before a coyote.
A tear adjusted the
perimeter farther
away from
where I wanted
to admit. But

he was here.
With me.
For now.

A bestiality
denied. A savage
beauty
mocked. By
a soccer
ball.
Fur bristly grey and
brown. But soft
to the breeze.
Alien to the
wet. Legs. Stiff
as branches.
But fluid.
Speed. Force.
Agility. Drawing
up geysers.
As blood.
Eyes. Steeped in
color. History.
Mystery. Sunset
to sunrise.
Never expecting. Always
anticipating.
Diego. Chewing on
the leash.

I dropped satchel.
Off back. I
ripped off
jersey.
Kicked
off soccer
shoes.
Undid his collar.

Pointed.

Go! Go!

A Monarch butterfly.
Landed on my
hand. Grandma. From
a Chinese
prophecy. Claims.
Love
will follow.

Falling into
a lie. With no
escape.
I can.
Run.

I chased after
Diego. For
miles. Before his tail
flicked a lacewing
off a leathery
leaf of a
madrone. Into
my eye.
Blinking
away. Tears
within inches. From
plowing into
its sprawling
limb.
Flushed
it out.
I ducked.
Hopped forward
on knees. Smashing
red toadstools.

Diego leaped
through a
wedge of
brotherly
trunks.

I scrambled up.
Trailed. Hurdled as
high. Landed.
Before. Diego.
The jackrabbit. Jaws
clamped around
its neck.
Crushed.
Dying.
Squealing.
Dead.
Devoured.

I knew then. Not
to follow.

I turned. Wherever
he went. I'd
go farther
without
him.
I walked back. No
words for a
coyote.

chapter twenty-eight

[28]

I reached there. Hours
later. Where
two Monarch
butterflies
tussled
for the right.
To the air. The
orange in their wings
brighter. With the
sunrise.

Out of breath.
Dolores approached
me. A broken
strap on her
leather
sandal. Flapped.
Left her foot.
As she
hurried. Hopped

on one foot.
Through bull
thistle. Up
to me.

With a grimace. Of
fatigue. Hurt.
I stopped
her.

You okay?

She asked.

That word.

It's for the best.

She added.

It is. For the
coyote.

I replied.

A ringtone
intruded.
She tugged her
iPhone out
of her sweatshirt
pouch. Of USWNT
gear. Out of the
blue. A chanting.
Echoes of USA!
USA! We
heard. Together.
Watching the World
Cup. Wishing.
Being kids. Making
promises. Always

believing.

But as feet pounded
the stands. Then.
As now. It
ripped terror through
me. I was no hero.
No champion.
If that was what
she wanted
from me.

Don't.

I said. Backing
up. Into a cocoon.
Where the
damn Monarch
butterfly
should be.
Love.
As well.

chapter twenty-nine

[29]

She stretched out.
Her *iPhone*.
Someone wants to
talk to you.

A scout?

Take it. Before it's
too late.

I shakily juggled
it up. To
ear.

Yes.

Oh.

Trying. You?

Yeah. I guess.

I'm not like you. More
like Dad.

You knew?

I'm not. As much.

I miss him.

I don't know.

I can't. Do you?

Of course. Sorry.
Just tired.

Diego. He's gone.

No. I let him go.

You coming home?

Cause of Dad?

Then me?

Mateo?

Messi? It's not the same.
Why would you
say that?
Yoganada.
He's a fraud.

I brought the phone
down. Screen
glared back
at me. As
me.

Mom?

Mom.

I looked about. Within
a field of green.
Faraway. A
dandelion blossom
unintentionally
yellow. Teased
a bee. Humming.
Lips quivered.
Coyote. Diego.
Awhile ago.
I recalled.
Sniffing.
Stung on snout.
He's coming to me.
For comfort. I'm
laughing.
Never again.

Dolores walked over.
She hugged me. I
hugged her
back.
Hard.

It's not okay.

She whispered.

It will be.

I got out.

Someday.